Zoology on the table: the science, sustainability and politics of eating animals

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There are many voices, many ideas and diverging opinions on what we should or should not do in relation to the food we eat, but there is comparatively little understanding of the relevance of zoology to this discussion. In running a forum entitled, "Zoology on the table: the science, sustainability and politics of eating animals", the Royal Zoological Society of NSW (RZS NSW) captured some of the wide range of views and scholarship on this subject, while working within the focus of science, and zoology in particular. The flyer advertising the forum, held on 7 November 2015 at the Australian Museum, outlined the intent of the day:

> *"Terms such as carnivore and predation are well established in zoology and ecology as they relate to animals eating other animals. The study of predator-prey interactions has a long and deep-rooted lineage within zoology and forms some of the core principles within many ecological studies. When human animals are the predator, however, the language used can change and many important and controversial social and political questions are brought to the fore. The practice of eating animals – from cows, fish and chickens to crocodiles and insects – is unavoidably bound up with issues of science, sustainability and politics. The production of the meats with which many of us are most familiar, beef, pork, chicken and lamb, is in many parts of the world shifting from farms and butchers shops, to factories and supermarkets. At the same time, fishing practices, from the recreational to factory ships and aquaculture, present us with a range of continuing and emerging challenges. Considering the vast biodiversity of invertebrates, it is surprising that only a few groups are commonly farmed or eaten in the 'west': crustaceans (prawns) and molluscs (mussels, scallops, abalone and oysters) foremost among them. Of course, many other cultures have long established practices of, for example, eating insects – and a growing number of environmental groups, like "Little Herds" in the USA, are calling for the expansion of this practice. One could also go through the supermarket and list all the animal food products, such as honey, eggs, milk, and cheese. The consumption of each of these animal foods raises a range of questions in the broad areas of ecology, ethics, food security, sustainability, legal constraints and options, and more. The food systems that we eat within are intimately connected to processes of habitat loss and the management of remnant native vegetation, as well as the consumption of incredible quantities of fossil fuels in the production, packaging and transportation of food. Today, hunting and fishing are often similarly complex, raising intractable issues around social justice and access to land, as well as the ethics and efficacy of various approaches to 'pest' and threatened species management. Nothing is simple when animals are on the table. Political concerns cover many areas of zoology, but this forum will hold its focus on the politics of eating animals. Zoologists can contribute to this critical debate about what we eat. There is also often a divide between some humanities scholars and those in the sciences on this issue and, in part, this forum aims to exchange points of view to explore the intellectual backgrounds that lie behind some of the positions and to look for common ground."*

The success of the day is reflected in this theme edition of *Australian Zoologist* by the range of papers and the vigorous plenary sessions, where opinions and ideas were exchanged and contested. The plenary sessions were lightly edited to render the spoken into the written word and are an integral part of this theme edition. The day of the forum was alive with persuasive data sets, and most importantly, a diversity of ideas. We do not intend to summarise the day here, but rather to draw attention to the development of the day, and how it addresses the idea of 'zoology on the table'. We have juxtaposed the scholarship in the written papers to the spontaneity of the plenary sessions that followed each bracket of papers.

What we found absorbing was the diversity of places where academic opinions and research results are to be found, but we also note that zoology and zoologists are largely absent from this field. Zoology has much to contribute to a discussion on the science, sustainability and politics of the animals we eat. Most zoologists have opinions about extinction, evolution, taxonomy, ecology, and the conservation and management of wildlife and of landscapes. This Royal Zoological Society of NSW forum demonstrated that all of these topics, and opinions, are part of the public debates on the food we eat.

In this publication arising from the day of the forum we can distinguish a number of apparently disparate themes. Their link is that they all call on subjects that tax zoologists. We edited this theme edition to identify the relevance of zoology, but we have not exhausted the topic at all. We can see by the wealth of writing on the subject of food that it will go on as long as people and animals need to eat – at least as long as people eat (other) animals.

The striking feature of the forum on the theme 'Zoology on the table: the science, sustainability and politics of eating animals' was the number of connections with such a large range of other disciplines. There is more than one meaning to being 'on the table'. Besides the pun, there is the sense that zoology is open to discussion on the subject of the animal food we eat.

Many ideas were put forward at the forum about how to see animals, how to see food scientifically, and how to see other dimensions of such interesting animals as dingoes, chickens, salmon and insects. In our opinion, zoology is not a discipline relegated to the end of the alphabet, it is an integral part of any decision on food, even if a vegetarian or vegan diet is the one of choice, because the land or sea that is used for food of any variety will affect the future of biodiversity, the survival of species, and the integrity of the environment of the planet.

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